Reflections of a Foot Soldier

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“Reflections of a Foot Soldier”

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My reflections will probably be of a different nature than those of many others represented in this archive. I have not had a career in diplomacy, nor have I been an architect of the labor diplomacy initiatives others have developed. Instead, I speak as one of the (once-) youthful foot-soldiers of the era.

It is, of course, possible to put a somewhat grander interpretation on some of my activities. After all, the research paper that I wrote during my year with the International Labor Office (1965-6) was one of the two papers that kicked off the World Employment Program, announced by the ILO in 1969. In that endeavor, I was the first person to actually run regressions in analyses in Switzerland for the ILO (others had used regressions in studies for ILO before, but had always used the computing facilities at their home universities). This involved, among other things, writing a detailed memo to the Director-General, estimating the cost savings between having the regressions done by IBM (Suisse) in

Zurich or having the “dactylos” in the clerical pool do them by hand! The papers which Jim Ypsilantis (of ILO's Statistical Branch) and I presented at the UN Conference on Long Term Forecasting and Planning (Elsinore, August 1966) were also the first ILO studies to carry the names of the authors—something needed by a young scholar—and not be generically attributed to the Director-General.

Now, all this is very interesting, especially to me, but doesn't really get close to my “summary evaluation of Us Government programs in the international labor field,” as you put it in your letter of February 27, 1995. Nor am I likely to do a “summary evaluation;” rather, I expect to lay out some of the issues and concerns encountered by those working “in the field.”

I will begin my narrative with my year (1965-6) in the Economics Branch of the ILO. To understand my two comments which follow, I think a bit of the situation around 1965 should be recalled:

First, modern economic research (with extensive quantitative work) was just appearing at the ILO, as my comment about having to justify the use of IBM's services will suggest. This was about to pick up steam as the WEP, with its major research component, moved forward.

Second, many of the more senior research staff had lived through Nazi and/or Soviet takeovers of their homelands. No matter how misplaced it might have been or how it might change in years to come, the level of support for a strong US stance in Vietnam was substantial among this group.

This leads into my first comment on what may seem like a minor matter. At the time, US government clearance was required for a US citizen to work for the ILO—not just as a professional, but for my wife as well when she picked up a short-term, part-time slot in the ILO Library. It was said with some derision that we and the Soviets were alone among the more industrialized member states in insisting on vetting our citizens for international

employment. Although it seems like a little thing, it certainly gave the US government a bit of a blemish.

My second comment really pertains to the time after I had left the Office, when the research program of WEP was up and running. For a while, one of the favorite targets of US delegates to the International Labor Conference and in meetings of the Governing Body was research. Certainly, US delegates were right to inveigh against soupy, sugar-coated reports on labor rights in some of the “Workers' Paradises,” but these attacks also focused on some really solid research, often done by reputable scholars brought in on short-term contract. I seem to recall one especially vigorous attack on a study of the need for life-long training, done I think by Vladimir Stoikov (then at Cornell's ILR School). At the time, I thought this was wrong-headed, in part because the better researchers on the staff were on the whole more favorable to the US and its interests in the ILO (especially in keeping the agenda of the International Labor Conference on track) and because the ILO is an appropriate organ for certain labor and human resources research.

I left the ILO in September 1966 when my contract expired and I was appointed an assistant professor in the Economics Department at Harvard. It was in that context that I had my second contact with “labor diplomacy,” if that's what it was. In the spring of 1967, I was approached by USAID with an eye to participating in its Summer Research Program. Several countries were mentioned, but we settled on Afghanistan, with a project to look at employment and employee compensation in the developing industrial sector. The idea of the SRP was to assist the research side of developing country universities; hence, the research was intended to be collaborative, conducted with a local counterpart. Unfortunately, Kabul University was linguistically balkanized, each department using as its second language the language of the country assisting it. Thus, the economics faculty all spoke German and Dari (two languages I do not speak). In any event, no counterpart was forthcoming.

USAID provided me with introductions (through the Industry Department of the Ministry of Mines and Industries), vehicles, drivers and interpreters and I conducted a survey of some 30 modern sector industries, ranging from a 2,000-employee textile mill at Gulbahar and a cement factory at Ghori to a small, inoperative oil-seed pressing mill near Bost. The results, quite interesting in many respects, appeared in the International Labor Review in 1969. This caused a bit of a diplomatic flap because the article was not by an Afghan official, either of the ILO or of the RGA. In spite of this, USAID brought me back to Afghanistan in the summer of 1970 to update the survey. This time I did have a counterpart, M. Na'im, but his research affiliation (if any) was unclear. Thus, the overall effect of SRP over two summers on promotion of research experience by Afghans remained very limited, to my way of thinking.

In other ways, I found the SRP experience—or rather, my connection with USAID and the way it operated in Afghanistan—to be rather unsettling. it did not seem to me that the US presence in Afghanistan was being used to its fullest in terms of the various things we might want to promote. At the simplest level, it was difficult to maintain the sense of equality probably essential to a counterpart relationship when the counterpart is barred from staying in the USAID Staff House (when available). Coming into Kandahar with the temperature at 130+ degrees, I certainly wanted the clean swimming pool and air conditioning of the Staff House. (As a labor economist, and not an anthropologist, I didn't think I needed to stay in the bazaar to “pay my dues.”) I can understand the rules, regulations, etc. that precluded Na'im from staying there—and I think he did too—but it still made the experience a funny one.

But, more broadly, I thought our US presence was not generating the human resource training and development outcomes that it could and probably should. On my first visit, USAID jobs were very strongly stratified. At the top were Americans, in charge of policy (the finance officer, the transportation officer); next came the Third Country Nationals, mostly Indians, who handled clerical and administrative chores (bookkeepers, cashiers,

stores attendants); at the bottom were the Afghans, confined to laborer and driver jobs. In fairness, it should be said that major state (Ariana Afghan Airlines, Radio Kabul) and private (IndAmer Afghan Industries) enterprises were arranged much the same way. I was told that there were at the time about 1200 “official” Americans in Afghanistan (this may have been USAID and Embassy staff combined), so the whole support enterprise was quite large. Yet, it seemed very little effort was being made to recruit, train and upgrade Afghan staff, at least with the object of replacing the TCNs. I thought we were missing a chance to contribute directly to human capital accumulation and, maybe, even to make a few friends. I raised this subject (naturally), and received the usual litany of previous failures, conclusions that Afghans were unstable workers, untrainable, etc. When I returned three years later, it did seem that some changes had been made, and more training was available for bookkeeper and stores attendant positions.

Whether or not these experiences qualify as “labor diplomacy,” I will note that I did have further contact with a USAID-backed project nearly 20 years later. In the springs of 1988 and 1989, I served as a consultant to the National Employment, Manpower and Incomes Commission of Botswana, on a project funded by AID through a contract with the Academy for Educational Development, Inc. My counterpart was an official of the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, Taufila Nyamadzabo, a University of Delaware MA in Economics. We traveled around the country, discussing minimum wages policy or productivity issues with employers, unions, and other contract. A much more successful model of counterpart relationship was involved in these experiences in Botswana.

My final contact with “labor diplomacy” was with the USDL's International Visitor Program. During my tenure at the University of Illinois, we had a fair number of such visitors; we had a couple of them at the University of Minnesota after I came here in 1979. I used them in my international/comparative classes, for special workshops, and alerted colleagues in other departments about their availability. These visitors seemed extremely valuable; I was severely disappointed when the IVP was eliminated in the early Reagan years.

I would say the same about the program in reverse (I think it was called IVP when American scholars were supported overseas, but am not sure). In any event, I was part of this once, in 1979, I think. I was to be in Japan for the Japan Institute of Labor Regional Conference, and was contacted by Joe Glazer of USDL. I was given the chance to speak at a number of business seminars in several Japanese cities, talking about recent developments in industrial relations and economic policy in the US. I found it interesting and believe that I helped my hosts understand a bit more of the US scene. Sixteen years later, will it have helped them understand our current Japan-bashing? I don't know, but I hope so.

Any “summary evaluation”? I suppose that, if one looks at these activities, they don't compare with efforts to bolster “free trade unionism” in France or Poland (through support of FO and Solidarity) and elsewhere, but they are part of an overall life of international activity which has brought my work to others (many scholars, but also government, business and labor people) around the world. In some sense, consider how the government's money (or in the case of employment at the ILO, approbation) has been “leveraged:”

My Universities (Illinois and Minnesota) have supported various initiatives, including travel to give papers at most of the IIRA World Congresses and a number of the regional congresses.

I have served as mentor or instructor to groups of American students in two University of Minnesota programs: Minnesota Studies in International Development (mentor in Varanasi, 1987, and Pune, 1989) and the Minnesota/Lyon III Joint Summer Program in Business (instructor, 1984).

MUCIA (the Midwest Universities Consortium for International Activities, composed of all but two of the Big Ten universities) supported (financially, for a while) the creation of a Third World Labor Markets Task Force (now a study group of the International Industrial

Relations Association), which I have chaired since the mid-1970s. The Study Group currently counts some 80 scholars and government researchers from 27 countries among its membership. Its most recent publication is Status Influences in Third World Labor Markets: Caste, Gender and Custom (de Gruyter: Berlin and New York, 1991), edited and with several chapters by me.

I was the labor market expert on the ILO's WEP Employment Strategy Mission to Iran in 1971-2, on World Bank Missions to Saudi Arabia and Jordan in the mid-70s, and on a MUCIA team (funded by the African Development Bank) in Mali, 1990.

During the summer of 1972, while in Iran on a University of Illinois research grant, I arranged for a meeting with Minister of Labor Abdol-Majid Majidi (whom I had not been “encouraged” to see during the WEP Mission the previous winter) to express my doubts about the employment balance sheet predicted in the Missions's Report. (I felt that the Report under predicted urban labor force increases and over predicted urban employment increases; civil unrest was among the consequences I foresaw of soaring urban unemployment. This whole story, and the degree to which it comports with subsequent developments, is reported in “The Labor Market in Pre-revolutionary Iran, “Economic Development and Cultural Change, October 1985.) I gave talks based on the same topic at a number of universities and at the USDL's International Manpower Institute in the mid-70s, before the Iranian Revolution.

I have spoken around the world on a range of labor topics, from a talk to foreign labor statisticians in St. Paul, MN to an address to a Banaras Hindu University conference on social integration in Varanasi, India.

Not, I think, a bad return on investment.

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End of interview